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UT Austin: A model of waste, or efficiency?

By [Daniel de Vise](#)

Richard Vedder, an Ohio University scholar, visited the Cato Institute today to [pose this question](#): Are we getting all we can from higher education?

Vedder made waves last spring with a report that used government data to make a case that large [public universities could be a lot more efficient](#). His target was the flagship University of Texas campus in Austin. He concluded, essentially, that if all the faculty at UT taught as many students as the most productive faculty, then UT tuition could be cut by half or, alternately, state subsidies could be slashed by 75 percent.

It was a provocative conclusion, and the university responded with a point-by-point rebuttal of his analysis.

The [UT analysis](#) found that the university's faculty overall generates nearly twice as much money as it costs in salary and benefits. It also found that 88 percent of professors in colleges with undergraduate students teach undergraduate courses.

Who's right?

Let's start with Vedder's criticisms.

His paper, published by the Center for College Affordability and Productivity, made the following claims:

- The most productive one-fifth of UT faculty teach well over half (57 percent) of student credit hours. That would suggest the other four-fifths of faculty carry barely two-fifths of the teaching load.
- The least productive one-fifth of faculty at UT teach only 2 percent of the classes.
- Faculty generally either teach or do research. However, Vedder found that 99.8 percent of research funding goes to a small, 20-percent minority of faculty, and 2 percent of faculty conduct nearly three-fifths of all funded research.

- Remember that super-productive group, the 20 percent of faculty who teach three-fifths of the classes? They also generate 18 percent of all research funding. In other words, they are teaching *and* producing scholarship. That suggests one endeavor does not necessarily preclude the other.

The internal UT analysis looks at the issue of productivity in a slightly different way, and its key findings don't directly contradict Vedder's. But the study makes a case that the university is highly efficient:

- Professors at UT teach an average of 1,300 credit hours per professor per year. If you divide that by 7 credit hours, which roughly equates to one student taking one class per semester, you get 185 students per professor.

- UT professors generated \$558 million in research funding and compensation from the state (the latter is tax revenue, to be clear, but it's money the university received for services provided to students). That totals about twice the \$257 million the professors were paid in salary and benefits.

The university's analysis examined faculty productivity in a different way than Vedder, chiefly to make the point that its "real" professors, those with tenure or on the tenure track, are fairly industrious teachers.

According to the UT report, tenured and tenure-track professors make up the majority of the most productive teaching staff at the university, and they make up only about one-fifth of the *least* productive teaching staff.

The one-fifth of teaching staff who do the least teaching are mostly adjunct faculty, who are paid per course, and graduate students, who are paid grad-student wages, all at little cost to the university.

Similarly, the least productive teachers at UT tend to be part-time, rather than full-time. In other words, the university doesn't pay them very much.

Vedder's analysis does not consider distinctions among types of instructors and, according to the UT analysis, is "nonsensical" as a result.

How does the university rate the productivity of its own teachers?

Here is its own analysis:

If you consider only tenured and tenure-track faculty, then the most productive one-fifth of UT faculty teach 47 percent of all credit hours, while the least productive one-fifth teach 5 percent. Those numbers aren't nearly so dramatic as Vedder's, but they still show the top one-fifth of faculty handling half the teaching load.

The university's analysis goes further and "weights" the faculty teaching load to give credit for the level of each course and the cost of teaching it. After applying the weights, the top fifth of professors generate 33 percent of teaching, and the bottom fifth produce 8 percent.

Marc A. Musick, a sociology scholar who authored the UT report, reaches this conclusion:

“(T)his is the type of distribution that any institution like UT Austin would hope for. Our university, like many others, is torn between offering large sections of lower-division classes that serve many students and smaller sections of upper-division and graduate sections that serve many fewer. Both types of courses are essential at a research university in an effort to provide a high quality education at the undergraduate and graduate level to large numbers of students. Quality would be sacrificed by offering fewer small and intensive courses, but the ability to educate many students would be sacrificed by offering fewer large classes.”

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